

## *“I appear on a page which would otherwise be blank”:<sup>1</sup> The Translator's Notes*

Text by Daisy Desrosiers

Translated from French by Käthe Roth

*The more voices speaking about a time, an event, a feeling, the richer and fuller history becomes, perhaps only to break totally, as a contained image or narratives, from the density and scope of contradictory descriptions. There can be no complete story, no real story, no decisive reading of events or their meanings. The more points of view there are, the more discussions there is, the more unmanageable the story becomes. And the more inspiring.*<sup>2</sup>

—Julia Ault

*My policy as translator has been—here as elsewhere—to avoid as far as possible interrupting this momentum ... This respect for the integrity and spirit of the book, of course, had to be weighed up against the risk of occasional awkwardness. I hope that I have made the right choices as to when to intervene and when to allow readers to piece together the clues themselves.*<sup>3</sup>

—Robin Mackay

I am fundamentally interested in the complexity of things but also, and especially, in how they are connected. I don't believe in order without chaos, or in the absolutism of “monolithic” histories. I'm averse to the idea of defining things (too) precisely. I prefer conditions that allow for exploring the capaciousness of a material, an experience, or an interpretation. I tend to seek interstices—which make it possible to advance, explore, and discover an idea all at once—and porosity. That's why I'm particularly fond of the elasticity and openness of language (whatever its form—poetic, embodied, literary, private, political, or visual). I admit, here, that my profound interest in language is directly informed by its complex relationship with translation. I don't define translation solely as the direct pairing of one word with its equivalent in another language; instead, I see in it the idea of a constantly changing relationship, and that's what fascinates me. My interest reflects both the multiple definitions (and translations) of the term *translation*<sup>4</sup> and the practice itself as a distinct space within which memory and knowledge cohabit. I don't imagine one without the other; I like to explore the implicit and contagious ways in which they inform each other. My curiosity about translation thus resides in the intersection of this encounter, as a disjointed narrative that maintains connections but, inevitably, proposes new vistas. What is more, I also conceive the process of translation as a material in itself, and that's why I also see translation as involving a process of recovery. In other words, it is “the result of” and, at the same time, a context in itself. I equally appreciate the fallibility—or, rather, vastness—of its possible iterations. Translation is a space of gains and losses, of discovery and bereavement.<sup>5</sup> I see this process of recovery as an archive under development that renders the traces of the process intelligible. The shifting caused by translation bears a unique burden—a precision and an imprecision that remain in perpetual tension. This shifting is a method that is self-referential, and I invariably return to the poetic, political, and transitive aspects implicit to performing it. Although, in its most direct form, the translator's task is tethered to authenticity, here I am interested

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<sup>1</sup> Madeline Gins, *The Saddest Thing Is That I Have Had to Use Words: A Madeline Gins Reader*, ed. Lucy Ives (Catskill, NY: Siglio, 2020), 140.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Ault, “Why Is Today the Same as Every Other Day?,” in *Cultural Economies: Histories from the Alternative Arts Movement*, NYC, exhibition catalogue (New York: Drawing Center, 1996), 27. See also Julie Ault and Nicolas Linnert (eds.), *In Part: Writings by Julie Ault* (New York: Dancing Foxes Press and Galerie Buchholz, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Robin Mackay, “The Number and the Siren,” in *In Praise of Opacity: A Collection of Translator's Writings*, ed. Daniel Frota (Arnhem: Werkplaats Typografie/ArtEZ Institute of the Arts, 2014), 294.

<sup>4</sup> I have in mind one of the many interpretations offered by Reynolds in his book *Translation*: “There are simple and complex reasons why there is no exact translation of ‘translation.’ The simple reason is that there is no exact translation of any word ... The word ‘translation’ is a bit different from the Italian *traduzione*, and very different from *kanbun-kundoku*, just as ‘bread’ is a bit different from ‘pane’ and more different from the Japanese パン (*pan*). But translation is an especially rich instance of this general truth. This is the complex reason. Because the activities we can call ‘translation’ are so varied, the word ‘translation’ keeps having to stretch or shrink to fit them. It keeps on being ‘translated,’ in the Bottom-like sense of shifting shape and meaning. When that happens, other words crowd in to jostle ‘translations’ and claim parts of the territory.” Matthew Reynolds, *Translation: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15

<sup>5</sup> I borrow this reflection from Salman Rushdie: “It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling obstinately to the notion that something can always be gained.” Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 17.

in the practice of transference, the mechanism that informs the movement from idea to form and vice-versa. I like to think of this process as an unstable material that demands constant reconsiderations because the temporal, ontological, and sensory context for its reception varies constantly. In other words, I am particularly interested in the idea of a liminal space in which the potential for new explorations around this relationship with translation resides. This idea gives me a better context for considering the intermediary space of a production of meaning that seeks not to complicate experience but to report on it.

One of the aspects peculiar to translation is to imagine the power of a form of re-inscription that is concrete and yet abstract. It is an exercise that can be approached with intention but also with intuition. For me, thinking this way opens the door to the practice of artist Erika DeFreitas, who provokes an exploration along similar lines. How can we reimagine the relationships that lead us to new truths, new readings? How do we reinterpret the stories—interrupted or unknown—that both precede and define us? Through what mnemonic, conceptual, or phenomenological strategies does written language inform our connections with images, and vice versa? How does it inform both their interpretation and their materiality? How do we articulate what has been erased and what the process of recovery may reveal? These open questions are what come to mind when I experience DeFreitas's work. And if this premise leads to an approach that is more exploratory than analytical, that's because it is somehow contiguous with her most recent body of work, in which, with a synoptic and sensitive discipline, she reconstructs the complex threads of shared, though erased, narratives.

Through the visual materiality of the image and its possible forms—photograph, collage, video—DeFreitas undertakes a sustained dialogue with a community of historically overshadowed women artists, muses, and authors, including Jeanne Duval. With these women, who have become her spiritual and symbolic companions, she carries on a host of conversations that inform and imbue her visual explorations. Recovering what had been forgotten, what was experienced and erased, and, above all, rewriting their contribution and presence through history to make them tangible are the core premises of DeFreitas's experimentations. Although some figures remain anonymous, the objective of her restoration is to bring them to light by deconstructing the hierarchy to which they were subjected; in her recent series of collages *very strongly may be sincerely fainting* (2017/2010), they exist fully, together and, most importantly, present. Her work relates to a trans-historical exploration that begins with the fragmented story of Jeanne Duval, born in Haiti and based in Paris for most of her adult life. A poet and dancer, Duval is better known for having been the muse and lover of Charles Baudelaire for more than twenty years. She is largely passed over in the literature on nineteenth-century art production, even though she had a significant influence on Baudelaire's work (the poem "La Chevelure," in the collection *Les Fleurs du Mal*, is one example), was the main subject of Édouard Manet's painting *La Maitresse de Baudelaire* (c. 1862), posed for Nadar in *Jeune modèle* (ca. 1855-59), and had a complex interplay with Gustave Courbet's *L'Atelier du peintre* (1854-55). Duval was, nevertheless, witness to the notable expressions of art in her time. Included in the preparatory study and the final version of Courbet's painting, her image was subsequently erased, upon Baudelaire's request. The mark of the tumultuous relationship between Duval and Baudelaire remains, however, on the right-hand side of the canvas as a shadow, an empty space, which DeFreitas revisits in the series *arriver avant moi, devant moi*. Although the title of the series (which translates, roughly, as "to arrive before me, in front of me") speaks to a linguistic proximity with her muse, it also suggests an invitation: I dare to imagine Jeanne observing, over her shoulder and through her reflection, a new narrative articulation that restores her to a central position. Interested in the historical dichotomy between absence and presence, DeFreitas underlines history's systemic treatment of the Black—and, moreover, female—body in the pictorial space. She also affirms the influence and fascination that Duval generated in a context of art production in which she was an eroticized foreigner, the "other." Through a conceptual rewriting, she observes and exposes the subtle strategies of erasure at the heart of the issues of power and representation, of which Duval offers a convincing example. Through juxtaposition and repetition, DeFreitas highlights the familiar, systemic aspect of the language of this absence, as well as the resistance of this "other" body in a space that obliterates it but, at the same time, constantly demands it.<sup>6</sup> She proposes a form of re-historicization of this otherness. In this series of eight images, she also quotes the work of Ghanaian-Scottish photographer Maud Sulter, who expressed her interest in Duval through a series of self-portraits. By this re-inscription punctuated with visual quotations, found objects, and personal annotations, DeFreitas freely revises the components of the narrative, derived from a story informed by a

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<sup>6</sup> I am paraphrasing American artist Lorraine O'Grady, with whom I share a fascination with Duval. In a recent interview on the subject, she created an important parallel with the emergence of modernity in Baudelaire's work: "Charles not only observed what Jeanne experienced day to day, he himself once lost a job because of her. It seemed to me that the insider-outsider position he occupied with her, while not a cause, enabled, perhaps made inevitable, the completeness of his transition to modernism." Cecilia Alemani, "Conversations: Living Symbols of New Epochs: Lorraine O'Grady," *Mousse* 24 (Summer 2010), <http://moussemagazine.it/lorraine-ogrady-cecilia-alemani-2010>.

monolithic authority, in order to better underline the importance of the historical complexity surrounding the figure of Jeanne Duval. In this sense, her relationship with Duval's story is one in constant evolution, reconstructed from the sensed potential of a liminal space in which performing the exercise of remembering, reconstructing, prevails.

Through the transparency of her process, as seen in her collages, photographs, and video works, DeFreitas invites the exhibition visitor (as spectator and reader) to follow traces of her interventions. She thus seems to place her trust in the double role of the gaze—hers upon the archives that she patches together and collects, and that of the visitor, who is invited, literally and conceptually, to follow and make sense of the process. Two clear strategies seem to traverse her work: it is no longer enough to recount, one must inscribe; what is more, the images speak for themselves and they are here, renegotiated in order to bring out what was omitted when they were first made. In this context, research is intended to be not a goal in itself but a mnemonic proposition that, through additions to or withdrawals from the image, aspires to be remembered. This process leads us to reflect on the narratives that evade us. DeFreitas offers a polymorphic reading both of the archives that she activates and of the narrative threads that she superimposes. What is uniquely poetic in her work is exactly this capacity to renegotiate the power of images, stories, and objects, which, through her manipulations, bespeak new relationships. I am also interested in the questions that her rewriting processes both raise and navigate: how do we share the stories that live within us? How do we write, without using words, the stories that objects that have survived through time hold within themselves? How do we read and listen to these “speaking” objects, which have had more than one life before now, in relation to the images that they inform? Matter evaporates, certain stories remain, but do we know how to tell them? It is by revisiting these questions that DeFreitas opens to the mind and the senses a space of gains and losses, of discoveries and bereavements. Through a visual and material exploration, she gives us a plural story to read that not only amplifies the symbolic meaning of previously omitted figures but brings them back into the picture—in the foreground.

In DeFreitas's practice, (re)staging is part of a performative re-inscription of the image, which she challenges in order to better incorporate into the present the possibilities of a future informed by omissions of the past. Here, it is the process of transference that composes the stories we tell and how we learn to tell them. In this way, she affirms a process that, in parallel to translation, offers an open proposal of reformulation that directly (and indirectly) brings new knowledge. She does not limit the possible interpretations but adds depth to the ways in which we can understand images and history as adjacent sites of continual production. Her practice gives form to a language that starts from facts, places, objects, and specific references, patching together and complexifying the narrative. And perhaps, in doing so, makes her work truer than the original. This is also, I think, what aligns her with the process of translation: she positions herself at the intersection of an encounter. I imagine this form serving interrupted narratives and obliterated contexts. The point is thus to reflect this proposal as an act of memory, of re-inscription of knowledge and of the authors who contributed to it. So, here it is: to Jeanne Duval, for this place, this history, and this reflection bring you back—from very far away. From now on, I speak, I write, and I know your name.

**Erika DeFreitas** is a Scarborough-based artist whose practice includes the use of performance, photography, video, installation, textiles, works on paper, and writing. Placing an emphasis on process, gesture, the body, documentation, and paranormal phenomena, she works through attempts to understand concepts of loss, post-memory, inheritance, and objecthood. DeFreitas' work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. She was the recipient of the TFVA 2016 Finalist Artist Prize, the 2016 John Hartman Award, and longlisted for the 2017 Sobey Art Award. DeFreitas holds a Master of Visual Studies from the University of Toronto.

**Daisy Desrosiers** is the inaugural Director of Artist Programs at the Lunder Institute for American Art at Colby College in Waterville (Maine, USA). She is an interdisciplinary art historian and independent curator. Her thesis concerns the cultural, post-colonial, and material implications of the use of sugar in contemporary art. She was the guest-critic for the Brooklyn Rail (NY, USA) in May 2020 and curated exhibitions in Canada, the US, and Europe. In 2018, she was the inaugural recipient of the Nicholas Fox Weber curatorial fellowship, affiliated with the Glucksman Museum (Cork, Ireland), as well as a curatorial fellow-in-residence at Art in General (Brooklyn, NY).

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Essay to accompany the exhibition *Erika DeFreitas : everything she inspires remains, belongs to light*, held December 11, 2020 to March 14, 2020 at the MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, curated by Emily McKibbon. © MacLaren Art Centre in collaboration with the individual contributors, 2021. All rights reserved.

The MacLaren Art Centre gratefully acknowledges the ongoing support of its Members, Patrons, Donors, Sponsors, Partners, the City of Barrie, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts, and exhibition sponsor Barriston Law.

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